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Hegel, Evil, and the End of History

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I. Introduction

This paper investigates the twin themes of evil and history in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. It explores the close linkage between Hegel's understanding of his work as a theodicy, and his feeling that it occupies a certain "stage" of history, what some scholars have called Hegel's "end of history" thesis. By suggesting that Hegel has no such end of history thesis in his philosophy, I will also show that reading Hegel's philosophy as a theodicy is equally problematic. Or, more accurately, since Hegel saw no need to offer a final answer to the question of historical progress (though he certainly felt entitled to say why it had turned out as it had up to his time), his claims to offer a theodicy are rather hollow and actually run counter to his openness to the future.^[1] What I address in this paper is the "hard" claim that Hegel believed history to have come to an end with his philosophy, that no further progress was possible for world history, defined as "the progress of the consciousness of freedom,"^[2] and not the "softer" claim that his philosophy was the culmination of Spirit's work on the world stage, and that all the pieces were in place for the final realization of history's goals. I think it evident that he *did* believe the latter; there is little serious evidence that he ever held the former view, however. This being the case, Hegel's strong claim regarding his philosophy of history as a theodicy has serious flaws. I conclude the paper with a sketch of what I call *finite* or *local* theodicies, and a suggestion that such theodicies (not theodicies at all in the traditional sense) offer a way forward for the philosophical problem of evil because they are ethical rather than metaphysical in their makeup.

Hegel's interpretation of history has been a perennially favorite topic for historians and philosophers. Yet Merold Westphal is surely correct when he states, "The verdict of history is, I believe, unambiguous. Hegel's project has failed. His philosophy has not been able to provide the spiritual foundation for freedom in the modern world."^[3] Note, however, that he says this in the *forward* to a book of essays on Hegel and freedom – Westphal goes on to present nearly 300 pages on Hegel, showing that failure is a relative term when it comes to Hegel's thought. I argue that one reason for this is that Hegel's multifarious philosophy resists the very totalization Hegel insists it must represent. This complexity is the basis for the argument I offer in this paper, that the tension between contingency and necessity ultimately drives Hegel to offer conclusions his own philosophy cannot support. So many lures of thought lurk in the details of Hegel's system, so many paths weave through his dense narratives, that his thought proves difficult to sum up and embrace or reject *tout court*.

II. Hegel's Philosophy of History as a Theological Text

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theodicy with full awareness of the history and difficulties of the concept (he explicitly references Leibniz's *Théodicée*, for example). Yet he persists in using the term theodicy, and in defining his philosophy of history as a theodicy of sorts. The reasons for this are complex, and have to do with the relationship between Hegel's religious thought and his political theory (two sides of the same coin, as it were). For the purpose of this essay, I shall locate the relationship between these two Hegelian themes in his statement that philosophical enquiry aims solely at eliminating the contingent, or "external necessity."^[5] The elimination of external necessity in history requires Hegel to show that it has an internal drive, that it develops around an "ultimate end" to which all its parts rationally relate. Religiously speaking, it means that God has an immanent relationship to world, and acts from within it to achieve the divine aims. Both of these ideas, that of the rational necessity of history, and the immanent necessity of the divine, come together in the theistic idea of Providence, which is at the heart of any attempt at a theodicy, including Hegel's.

At first glance, Hegel takes over many "traditional" views of Providence, such as the existence of an unseen hand, as it were, guiding events. But this picture is deceiving. One of the things that makes Hegel's appeal to Providence unique is his desire to see it as both necessary and rational – absent is any feeling that Providence is something to which only faith has access. Indeed, Hegel's understanding of Providence is a serious attempt to define it away from faith; H. S. Harris explains Hegel's position relative to that of Kant: "For Kant [Providence] was indeed an object of rational faith. But Hegel's way of being faithful to Kant was a lifelong struggle to eliminate the necessity for the 'faith' for which Kant claimed to have made room."^[6] For his part, Hegel says that "We cannot be content with ... trivial faith in Providence, nor indeed with a merely abstract and indeterminate faith which conceives in general terms of a ruling providence but refuses to apply it to determinate reality; on the contrary, we must take the problem seriously."^[7] Hegel proposes to tackle this problem, the problem of coming to a real knowledge of the providence of God, by viewing history as the concrete manifestation of God's work in the world. To come to a knowledge of the movement of history is to understand the plan of God – and such knowledge is not only possible for humanity, but according to Hegel is in fact commanded by scripture and demanded by reason.

Hegel was aware of those in his own time who accused him of epistemic aggrandizement concerning the divine; nevertheless he was adamantly opposed to those who adhere to "the doctrine, now hardened into a prejudice, that it is impossible to know God, notwithstanding the teaching of the scriptures that it is our highest duty not only to love God, but to know God."^[8] Hegel cites 1 Cor 2:9-10 (which in turn cites Isaiah 64:4) in his defense: But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God." According to Hegel, attainment of such knowledge is far from arrogance. It is, in fact, the supreme humility to "recognize and revere God in everything, especially in the theater of world history."^[9] Hegel stakes his claim to offer a theodicy squarely within the realm of history. At the same time, Hegel is aware that one needs certain "eyes" to see the work of God in the world. For a traditional Providence, these would be the eyes of faith. But Hegel has no need of such eyes; rather, "we must see with the eye of the concept, of reason [*das Auge des Begriffs, der Vernunft*], which penetrates the surface and finds its way through the complex and confusing whirl of events."^[10] Clear, reasonable Hegelian eyes can see order and purpose in what others

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reasonableness of the world, for Hegel and for all others who seek to find traces of God in the events of life, is the reality of evil. It is for this reason that Hegel casts his lectures as a theodicy, and it is for this reason that they should be read as theological texts, not simply as reflections on history and philosophy.

III. Nietzsche and the Myth of the End of History

Before the issue of the lecture's theological status is addressed further, however, it is necessary to look at what I see as a related issue, the claim that Hegel believed his philosophy to stand at the end of history. In short, I believe that if Hegel does not represent his work as the end of history (and he does not), he has serious problems offering a corresponding final theodicy. By "end of history" Hegel interpreters do not mean that the events of history will come to an end, something akin to an "end of the world" scenario. Rather, the end of history means that the goal of history has been realized (the achievement of the consciousness of freedom), and all that remains is to make it universal. It is not true that all people *are* free, but the conditions now exist whereby all *can be made* free, for example. This or something like it is what interpreters mean when they claim to see an end of history in Hegel's philosophy. However, there are serious problems with this reading. My claim that Hegel has no end of history in his philosophy is not a new one. Indeed, it is well established in Hegel scholarship.^[11] Nevertheless, the idea will not die a natural death, and returns time and again to haunt considerations of Hegel's historicism. Without a doubt, the most important proponent of the end of history thesis in the twentieth century is Alexandre Kojève, whose Marxist interpretation of Hegel in his 1947 *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel* has dominated much of the subsequent work on Hegel's philosophy of history. However, in this paper I want to go back as far as we can, to the nineteenth century roots of the idea. The two most important nineteenth century sources for the end of history thesis in Hegel are Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich Engels. In this paper, I will deal only with Nietzsche, the earlier of the two.^[12] Following my discussion of Nietzsche, I will draw the historical matter of my paper together with the theological.

It is important to understand what the "end of history" claim actually represents in this context. Nietzsche believes that it represents the inevitable end of Hegelian claims to completeness (as does Engels), and the triumph of a particularly self-assured form of German culture. In one way or another, most interpreters have followed Nietzsche's reading (with the more charitable opting for philosophical rather than cultural superiority). In fact, as a teleological thinker, Hegel does speak of an end (in the sense of goal, the *allgemeinen Endzweck der Welt*) of the world as such, though he certainly attaches no historical date to this usage.^[13] In the few times he speaks of "the end of history," this phrase appears in statements such as: "The history of the world moves from east to west, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning."^[14] This seems straightforward enough, but here Hegel is developing a rather facile geographical metaphor, wherein "the course of world history [is] 'the great day's work of spirit,' and since the historical sun rose in the east, it plainly has to set in the west when the day's work is done."^[15] As it stands, there is little reason to make this passage definitive for the whole of Hegel's historical thought, for at most it exists to introduce the well known Hegelian idea, found in the very same paragraph, that "the East knows that *One* is free, the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are free, and the German world, that *All* are free."^[16] It may well be a statement about Hegel's understanding of freedom, which is certainly related to his definition of what history actually is (history is "the progress of the consciousness of

idea as we know it today came from very definite, non-Hegelian sources, the earliest of which may be found in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche.

In his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche laments Hegel's apotheosis of historical consciousness, and mocks the drive of German philosophy after Hegel towards ever more reified forms of completeness and finality. He writes, parodying the typical tone of Hegelianism, "suppose we imagine [these philosophers] announcing in shrill tones: the race is now at its zenith, for only now does it possess knowledge of itself, only now has it revealed itself to itself."^[18] In case Nietzsche's disdain for such philosophy is lost in his wit, he goes on to state clearly, "I believe that there has been no dangerous vacillation or crisis of German culture this century that has not been rendered more dangerous by the enormous and still continuing influence of this Hegelian philosophy."^[19] This attack on Hegelianism is familiar theme in Nietzsche, and I do not want to spend an inordinate amount of time on it. I do wish to point out, however, that what incenses Nietzsche so, at least in this section of the *Untimely Meditations*, is the ironic stance of these "antiquarian latecomers" (*antiquarische Spätlinge*) relative to their own position in history: having come upon the scene too late to actually affect history (surely an oblique reference to the end of Hegel's famous preface to the *Rechtsphilosophie*), they proclaim that they are, in fact, its goal.

The idea that Hegel does (or should) believe history has come to an end makes its first significant historical appearance here in the *Untimely Meditations*, with Nietzsche's thoughts on Hegel's historicist theology. Nietzsche writes, "History understood in [the] Hegelian manner has been mockingly called God's sojourn on earth, though the god referred to has been created only by history."^[20] Now, this is not entirely true, but allow me to set that aside for now. Nietzsche continues, "This god, however, became transparent and comprehensible to himself inside Hegelian craniums and has already ascended all the dialectically possible steps of his evolution to this self-revelation: so that for Hegel the climax and terminus of the world-process coincided with his own Berlin existence."^[21] In other words, God becomes God through Berlin-era Hegelian philosophy, bringing the world-process to an end. Nietzsche is too astute a reader of Hegel to actually impute this position to Hegel – for Nietzsche knows that Hegel did not say this. According to Nietzsche, "Indeed, [Hegel] *ought to have said* that everything that came after him was properly to be considered merely as a musical coda to the world-historical rondo or, even more properly, as superfluous"^[22] (emphasis added). Perhaps he ought to have said this, if Hegel is to be equated with those who came after him and used his system to this end. But he did not say this, or anything of the kind. And Nietzsche says as much: "instead he implanted into the generation thoroughly leavened by him that admiration for the 'power of history' which in practice transforms every moment into a naked admiration for success and leads to an idolatry of the factual [*Götzendienste des Thatsächlichen*]."^[23]

Here we come to Nietzsche's true criticism of Hegel, and the reason why he sees Hegel's philosophy representing a claim to be the end of history. He thinks Hegel is making two claims: one, that history had to turn out as it has, and two, the way that it has turned out is imminently rational. This is not an uncommon interpretation of Hegel, and Hegel *does* believe something like this. Francis Fukuyama brought Hegel (or his capitalist version of Hegel) to the front page of *Time* magazine in the early 1990s with his book *The End of History and the Last Man* by making essentially this very argument, namely, that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet communism was the result of history ending with the triumph of free market democracies. Such democracies represent the point beyond which history was unable to progress, because they had been the

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vernünftig.”[24] This statement, coupled with the Hegelian interest in history, seems to give ample warrant to Nietzsche’s claim that Hegel felt that he stood at the end of history and had explained it once for all time. After all, if history is the story of developing rationality writ large across the *kosmos*, and what is rational is what is actual, the existing order should be glorified as the apex and reason, and it is entirely right, as Nietzsche says, to “bend [one’s] back and bow [one’s] head before the ‘power of history’ ... to do reverence to the whole stepladder of ‘success.’”[25] If philosophical reflection on power can be reduced to a meditation on historical inevitability, such that one philosophical system can explain why history had to progress in just this way, and that it could progress no further, then of course such a system would be the ultimate affirmation of the status quo, and would be the perfect target for Nietzsche’s ire.

IV. Hegel and the End of History

I think it important to point out that Nietzsche’s criticisms are entirely correct, as far as they go. Any system of thought which arrogates to itself the prerogative of ultimate power is in desperate need of the Nietzschean critique. It is equally clear that Nietzsche’s critique applies to Hegel in many instances. What is not so clear is that it applies here. In fact, I think a case can be made that Nietzsche misunderstands Hegel here, perhaps for rhetorical reasons (always a possibility with Nietzsche), or perhaps for basically historical ones. Moreover, his misunderstanding lies at the heart of what is wrong with the entire end of history thesis. I have no intention of arguing that Nietzsche attacks “Hegelians” but leaves Hegel in peace; Nietzsche clearly thinks Hegel should have been honest, followed his own teachings and just proclaimed history to have been at an end. I have to disagree with Nietzsche, however. Hegel could not have done this, for a very simple reason: it would have violated the epistemic humility Hegel built into his system. I am aware that using the words “humility” and “Hegel” together may alarm some; however, let us be clear on what this actually means. Hegel thinks that philosophy is able to explicate everything that is, including even God, for everything displays an internal necessity which is amenable to thinking (this is part of Hegel’s “elimination of the contingent”). There is a transparency to the world for Hegel that Nietzsche correctly identifies and thoroughly abhors. This transparency is due to the putative explanatory power of Hegel’s philosophy, and Hegel’s Aristotelian belief that nature, the world, the *kosmos*, is amenable to thought and can in fact be known through reason. Hegel writes, “the only thought which philosophy brings with it is the simple idea of *reason* – the idea that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process,” and furthermore “That this idea is true, eternal, and omnipotent, that it reveals itself in the world, and that nothing is revealed except the Idea in all its honor and majesty – this, as I have said, is what philosophy has proved.”[26] It is this sort of confidence that led Heidegger to identify Hegel as a paradigmatic example of ontotheological metaphysics (“Truth here always means that the knowable as such is known with a knowledge which is absolutely certain of itself.”)[27]

But Heidegger’s formulation hides an important *caveat* to this reading of Hegel. Heidegger says that the “knowable as such is known,” but Hegel is clear that there is at least one thing that is unknown, and unknowable: the future, that which is unknowable as such, for it is not real; it is a permanent not-yet. Heidegger, in his lecture course on Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, says that Hegel is silent about the future; by this he means that the future is unimportant for Hegel, because the past is what is decisive for time.[28] Heidegger is right that Hegel seldom

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know. Philosophy may and indeed should concern itself with what is and what has been, and in this sense Heidegger is correct, the past is what is decisive. But more to the point, the matter before speculative philosophy is what is now, and what had been before – the future is *not* philosophy's to decide. Only in this sense is Hegel silent about the future. We have to take very seriously Hegel's strictures against philosophy turning into prophecy, "for prophecy is not the business of the philosopher. ... In philosophy ... we are concerned not with what belongs exclusively to the past or the future, but with that which is now, both now and forever – in short, with reason."^[29] One can argue about whether or not Hegel felt that things *had* to progress into the future in exactly the same way that they had progressed up to his historical present, but we simply cannot say that Hegel felt that the entire circus of history had packed up its big tent and rolled on down the road. There was, for Hegel, much that the progress of freedom still could accomplish, much that it would, and it was far more than the "musical coda to the world-historical rondo" Nietzsche described.

What we have in Hegel is a culmination of history, but not an end – a fine distinction, perhaps, but a necessary one. At the conclusion of his philosophy of history, Hegel says "This is the point which consciousness has attained,"^[30] as if to say, "We have come this far, from here we can survey the past and understand how and why we arrived here." It is basic to Hegel's phenomenological method not to issue prescriptions about how the world *should* be, however. He explicitly states this in the *Philosophy of Right*: "A further word on the subject of *issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be: philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function."^[31] Of course, even a pronouncement about the culmination of history seems far too shocking for postmodern sensibilities. Indeed, there is no point in trying to defend Hegel against metaphysical claims to totality. But let us be clear about what Hegel is *not* suggesting. He is not suggesting that he has witnessed the end of history, only the point in history where freedom has finally arrived on the scene in its fullness; recall his definition of world history as "the progress of the consciousness of freedom."^[32] Did Hegel believe that freedom had attained its fullness in his lifetime, and was explicated by his philosophy? Probably he did. He certainly thought the conditions for such an attainment had arrived, at least in nascent form, and if this is all that interpreters mean by the end of history, so be it. Did he believe that further developments of freedom were attainable? I see no reason why not, especially given his few statements about the development of history in the Americas, for example.^[33] Though Hegel does claim to view history *up to* his time *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it were, in no sense has history ended for Hegel (unless it be in the "softer" sense I described earlier). Perhaps the most accurate thing one can say about his philosophy of history is that it anticipates a *goal* for history, the goal of complete freedom for all, and by any measure, then or now, that goal is still a long way off, as even Hegel realized.

V. Theology at the End of History

So what has all of this to do with evil and theology? Hegel claims that it has a lot to do with both. Hegel bookends his philosophy of history with the claim that it serves as a theodicy, a view backwards over the "slaughterbench of history" that justifies it being called the work of God.^[34] He writes, "Our intellectual striving aims at demonstrating the conviction that what was *intended* by eternal wisdom, is actually *accomplished* in the domain of existent, active Spirit, as well as in that of mere Nature."^[35] This concern with evil in history, and with defining

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real phenomenon that manifests itself the same way for him as it does for us today: in natural disasters, in senseless warfare, in disease, and in random violence.[36] Evil for Hegel is a manifestly historical occurrence, for he says that “it is in world history that we encounter the sum total of concrete evil.”[37] He concerns himself not with metaphysical definitions of evil, but with the sorts of things people identify as evil in their everyday lives. At the same time, he believes these contingencies (for it is hard to envision human evil as anything other than a radical contingency in all aspects of life) are accounted for in what he calls “the absolute sovereignty of reason [*der absoluten Macht der Vernunft*],”[38] the fact that the losses of history are redeemed within history, and through history.

Explaining evil in such a way is, of course, the traditional purview of theodicy. Philosophically speaking, theodicies usually stand *in terminus res*, typically in face of a disaster or momentous occasion, and arise because of the traditional theistic view of Providence discussed earlier. That is, they are backwards looking, and strive for explanatory value in the face of what is taken to be the basic goodness of the world. Given this, that Hegel offers up his philosophy of history as a theodicy certainly does indicate that he feels it serves as some type of theological culmination or consummation of history, at least, though not an out-and-out “end” of history *per se*. The distinction between *end* and *culmination* is perhaps small, but important. There is no *end* within an immanent theology, and Hegel’s characterization of his lectures as a theodicy is a consistent attempt on his part to maintain his immanent theology, wherein God and the world reach fulfillment with each other and within each other (as Hegel tells us, “Without the world God is not God.”)[39] Since evil is a historical problem for Hegel, it must be a divine problem as well. Yet Nietzsche is simply wrong when he accuses Hegel’s God of being created by history. The story is far more complicated than that; Hegel’s philosophy requires a view of God that can embrace both the naturalistic position (the world as self-sufficient) and the theistic position (the world as designed by God). Hegel combines these in his immanent view of God, wherein (as Charles Taylor puts it) Hegel’s “idea is therefore that of a God who eternally makes the conditions for his own existence.”[40] Whatever this is, it isn’t Nietzsche’s history *qua* divinity.[41] On the other hand, if Hegel is going to maintain a view of God within history, and at the same time insist that evil is a historical problem, he will have to reconcile the ideas of evil and God in some fashion. Since Hegel is committed to both horns of the theodicean dilemma (omnibenevolence and omnipotence, though radically historicized in a uniquely Hegelian manner), it seems impossible for him to escape from the theodicean paradox of a God that indeed works in mysterious ways, but leaves far too many corpses in his wake to be anything but a monster.

To put it plainly, I think Hegel cannot escape the paradox. So why am I addressing this? Have I defended Hegel against misinterpretations of his philosophy of history only to dismiss finally the very purpose of that history, the reconciliation of God with history? I hope not. I have juxtaposed Hegel’s theodicy with his *lack* of an end to history to point out a fundamental tension in his thought, the tension between contingency and determinacy: the tension between his stated desire to see contingency overcome at all costs,[42] and his resolute drive to hold his system open at the very place where one would expect it to close. Nietzsche is right, in a way – Hegel *should* have ended history, but he failed to do so. Hegel knows his system has to stand as a culmination if it is to be what he envisions it to be, but at the same time he insists that philosophy cannot be in the business of foretelling the future, and that there are directions and meanings that spin out into the future and subvert any and all

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Hegel's *speculative* philosophy, in which all loose ends are tied up, and all evils are set right in the outworking of Absolute Spirit, is also a *dialectical* philosophy, which only advances when there is conflict and conversation. The tension between speculation and dialectic cannot be overcome in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel would view this as a flaw; I view it as a strength.

Because Hegel gives Providence an entirely this-worldly quality, a final reckoning for the work of Providence *cannot* be had outside of history itself. Since history can and will continue (not just events, but the development of the progress of freedom in concrete forms), such an accounting cannot be made, and thus evil can only be provisionally accounted for, if at all, and not finally, as Hegel seems to want to imply. This is what I mean when I call for *local* or *finite* theodicies (which are, in truth, an overturning of all theodicies). Such theodicies have nothing at all to do with the metaphysical project of giving evil its necessary place in the world, as it were, but rather work to situate evil within the human and finite context that bred it. A finite theodicy avoids all claims to metaphysical completeness. Theodicies in all forms (and Hegel's is chief among them in this respect) make sense of evil by either explaining it as necessary though hateful, or explain it by an appeal to mystery – but not mystery in any real sense, for of course the deity, the universe, Providence, or whatever it is controlling reality ultimately knows the reasons for evil and thus is ultimately accountable for the evil in the world (in terms of omnipotence, foreknowledge and causality simply cannot be separated). A finite theodicy does not say “There is a greater good being served,” or “we cannot know why, but God knows,” or even “there is a reason and one day we will understand it.” It is not backwards looking; it is, in fact, no justification at all. A finite theodicy abrogates the *dike* in favor of a fuller accounting of the experience of *theos*. It claims that God is present in evil and pain, but is not the justification for it. Such an understanding would radically change the terms of the discussion when it comes to theodicy.

VI. Hegel's Uses of Theology, and Using Hegel for Theology

Theologians sympathetic to Hegel often seem to want him to be one of them, to have similar reasons for introducing the “God hypothesis” into philosophy as they do. That is not my concern here. I have no desire to baptize Hegel, to make him appear more orthodox or more pious than he really is. His use of Christian categories is not that of a theologian with some degree of faith commitment to those categories, and while I take seriously Hegel's belief that philosophy and theology share the same subject matter, Hegel is no theologian. Hegel is right to draw on the Christian religion for inspiration here, but I fear his usage draws too much on the *Christus victor* tradition and not enough on the tradition of *Christum crucifixum* (probably for philosophical reasons: the “speculative Good Friday” for example has to do not with the resurrection of Christ, but the ability of reason to rise from its ignorance and ascend to the absolute).^[44] Hegel's own Lutheran confession refuses to close the question of the future; the formulation is, “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ *will come* again,” in the future tense. And this, I think, is the “solution” to the theodicean problem, though I can only hint at it in this paper; theodicies are backwards-looking, and indulge in what Michael André Bernstein calls “backshadowing” or the tendency to read back into events our own fears and justifications, and thus they fail.^[45] That is, they focus on the *dike*, the justification, when there can be none, and on what “should have been known,” when knowledge breaks down in the face of senseless evil. I say this in the spirit of Rabbi Irvin Greenberg, whose statement

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must end. What remains is not the metaphysical work of justification (omnipotence as a metaphysical category is bankrupt), but the ethical work of comforting, and overcoming, which is forward-looking. The movement of theodicy, once it realizes (in keeping with one of Hegel's best insights) that evil is a this-worldly, human problem properly located within the sphere of human action, is away from *justification* and towards *justice*. Dead children are not an epistemological problem.

Hegel's refusal to envision an end for history should have informed his thinking on evil. Because evil is located "concretely" in history according to Hegel, no full accounting for evil in historical terms can be had until we can look back on history, as it were (theodicy is always *in terminus res*) – and this we can never do, or at most can do only partially. The type of zero-sum theodicy Hegel envisions (zero-sum not because there are not real losses, but because the losses are necessary for the development of Spirit) closes a door that Hegel cannot close. It is deeply unsatisfying for many to leave evil unaccounted-for in an ultimate sense, just as it is to leave the future open, uncontrolled by some unseen force. However, Hegel's philosophy requires that they both be left as open questions, even when Hegel himself wants to close them. In the end, theodicies fail not because they seek to justify evil (evil has no ultimate justification such as Hegel seeks), but (taking the term literally) they seek to justify God – a prime example what Heidegger called ontotheology, that is, allowing philosophy to decide when, where, and how the deity enters it. Such a deity is false to lived religion; as Heidegger says, this is an idol, the *causa sui*, and "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe, nor can he play music and dance before this god." [47] Such is the God defended in theodicy.

Theodicy, classically understood, is an apocalyptic undertaking, a quest for revelation, and as such is bound to fail. Hegel's hope for a theodicy is such an apocalypse, and this is its fatal flaw. Hegel knew better than to close his discussion of history, but that same history drove him to justify the powers at work within it, and the evil that took place within it. This is an example of Hegel not following his own better judgement, or at least not picking up on the lures of thought that he had strewn across the pages of his own philosophy. I have theological reasons for wanting to question Hegel's characterization of his philosophy of history as an adequate theodicy; Heidegger has enunciated some of them for me. But for now, the philosophical reasons are enough. Hegel likely had no conception of what kinds of evil the twentieth century had in store. I like to think his philosophy of history would have been less sanguine if he had (he certainly tried to take seriously the evil he knew of), but we cannot be sure. There is evidence in his philosophy that he could have withheld judgement on evil in the same way that he withheld it for history and the future, and I have tried to suggest that in this paper. Further study will have to judge if I am right.

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Notes:

[1.](#) Although I wish to problematize the prevalent theodicean reading of Hegel's lectures, I take it as simply true that he *does* see them as a theodicy, and that as such they are open to theological as well as philosophical criticism.

[2.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 12:32.

[3.](#) Merold Westphal, *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992): xvi

[4.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 12:32

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[6.](#) H. S. Harris, "The End of History in Hegel," in *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* (1991): 4.

[7.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 12:26

[8.](#) *Werke* 12:26

[9.](#) VG 42

[10.](#) VG 32

[11.](#) The most concise exploration and refutation of the "end of history" myth in English is to be found in the essays collected in the volume *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, Ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

[12.](#) For Engels' notion that Hegel "felt compelled to bring [the historical process] to an end", see Engel's "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," *Werke* 21:267ff. Marx, curiously, does not draw this conclusion from Hegel's thought (Marx was quite sure history was going to progress beyond Hegel as a movement of freedom), though it is important for Engels' interpretation of Hegel's place in German thought.

[13.](#) Cf. Hegel, VG 29

[14.](#) *Werke* 12: 134

[15.](#) Joseph McCarney, *Hegel on History* (London: Routledge, 2000): 174

[16.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 12:134

[17.](#) *Werke* 12:32

[18.](#) Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke* 1:308

[19.](#) *Sämtliche Werke* 1:308

[20.](#) *Sämtliche Werke* 1:308

[21.](#) *Sämtliche Werke* 1:308

[22.](#) *Sämtliche Werke* 1:308

[23.](#) *Sämtliche Werke* 1:309

[24.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 7:24

[25.](#) Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke* 1:309

[26.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 12:20-21

[27.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957): 33

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[29.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 12:114

[30.](#) *Werke* 12:539

[31.](#) *Werke* 7: 27-28

[32.](#) *Werke* 12:32

[33.](#) Statements such as “America is the country of the future, and its world-historical importance has yet to be revealed in the ages which lie ahead” (VG 209) pose problems for the end of history thesis that have never been adequately addressed.

[34.](#) *Werke* 12:35

[35.](#) *Werke* 12:28

[36.](#) Evil is more than this for Hegel, of course; it is primarily explicated in terms of knowledge and estrangement in the philosophy of religion (VPR 228-33), for example. But Hegel’s emphasis on actual historical facticity in the history lectures leads him away from more abstract interpretations.

[37.](#) VG 48

[38.](#) VG 49

[39.](#) *Werke* 16:192

[40.](#) Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979):39

[41.](#) Nor is it William Desmond’s *deus sive historia*, though Desmond is right to point out that the self-disclosure of God in/as history creates serious problems for Hegel’s consideration of evil (2003: 143-5).

[42.](#) E.g. VG 29

[43.](#) Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967): 41.

[44.](#) Hegel, *Werke* 2:432-3

[45.](#) Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994):16

[46.](#) Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust,” in *Auschwitz, Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, 7-55. Ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Cathedral of St. John the Divine, 1977):23

[47.](#) Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* 64

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